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REQUEST FOR THE INCLUSION OF AN ADDITIONAL ITEM IN THE AGENDA OF THE FORTY-EIGHTH SESSION

ASSISTANCE IN MINE CLEARANCE

Letter dated 19 August 1993 from the representatives of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

We, the Permanent Representatives of the 12 States members of the European Community, have the honour to request, in accordance with rule 14 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, the inclusion in the agenda of the forty-eighth session of the General Assembly of an additional item entitled "Assistance in mine clearance".

In accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedure, an explanatory memorandum concerning the request is annexed to the present letter.

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ANNEX

Explanatory memorandum

1. The ever-increasing use of mines and other explosive devices during armed conflicts has taken an intolerable toll of victims, especially among the civilian population. When hostilities cease, minefields and other areas ridden with unexploded devices perpetuate a climate of terror, aggravated by the fact that these areas are not marked, and by the continued danger represented by such devices after they have been laid.

2. In "An Agenda for Peace", the Secretary-General very clearly highlighted the urgency of mine clearance in countries that have been victims of a conflict and the multi-dimensional aspect of the disastrous consequences of the presence of undetonated mines and other explosive devices. The presence of land mines, especially because of their indiscriminate effect, not only represents a danger to the civilian populations and an exorbitant medical and social cost, but is also an obstacle to the repatriation and the resettlement of refugees or displaced persons. It complicates the shipment of humanitarian relief and assistance to the restoration of basic services, which are already difficult in war-torn countries. Furthermore, it places the personnel participating in these operations in constant danger. The presence of unexploded mines and other devices, particularly along communications routes and on farmlands, seriously hampers economic recovery and reconstruction and the restoration of a normal social order.

3. The difficulties encountered in, inter alia, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Mozambique in repatriating refugees and resettling displaced persons and in shipping emergency assistance, prove that a comprehensive programme of assistance in mine clearance which takes into account all the aspects of economic and social reconstruction must be contemplated on a priority basis.

4. While the primary responsibility for mine clearance lies with the State in whose territory the mines are located, the profoundly disorganized situation of countries ravaged by years of conflict and the complex, costly nature of the programmes to be implemented must also be taken into account. The contribution of the international community, whether on a bilateral basis or through regional organizations or United Nations agencies, is therefore a key factor in dealing with the disastrous consequences of the presence of mines.

5. The question concerning the presence of undetonated mines and other explosive devices has been raised within certain bodies of the United Nations system:

(a) On 26 February 1993, the Security Council issued a Presidential statement (S/25344) which included mines among the obstacles to the reconstruction of countries in the post-conflict phase;

(b) The Informal Open-ended Working Group of the General Assembly on "An Agenda for Peace" also drew attention to matters which should be taken into account on a priority basis for post-conflict peace-building.

6. The Security Council also accorded higher priority to the need to take into account various aspects of mine clearance in organizing peace-keeping operations.

7. International law, in particular the 1981 Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, is of paramount importance in preventing the misuse of mines and encouraging the attainment of lasting solutions for the future. It should be pointed out, however, that the tremendous accumulation of unexploded devices in countries emerging from a conflict is an urgent problem that requires a stronger and coordinated international response.

8. The magnitude of the task, its complexity and its cost require a broader approach than that taken in ordinary military operations. Even before the start of the mine-clearance activities themselves will come a whole phase of preparation, personnel training, the exchange of information and know-how, the establishment of evacuation routes and the building of infrastructure. The number of mines and the fact that they are widely scattered also mean that new techniques of defusing them on a large scale must be clearly identified and developed. The rapid start-up of a coherent, effective mine-clearance programme therefore implies very close coordination of the various United Nations bodies responsible for humanitarian assistance and economic and social recovery.

9. Belgium, on behalf of the Community and its member States, takes the view that these are among the concerns that should be considered by the plenary Assembly under the item it proposes for inclusion in the agenda of the Assembly.